

Performance. Walkabout. Don't Look Now Nicholas Roeg Permutations without profundity

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In his three films to date Nicholas Roeg has established himself as one of the important young British directors. But precisely what his importance is is not certain. His debut film, co-directed with Donald Cammel, *PERFORMANCE* (completed 1968, released 1970), combined the appeal of superstar Mick Jagger, drugs, sex, violence, and rock music. When released it was generally abhorred by establishment reviewers but quickly became a cult film among the young, and it retains its status among the great stoned features of recent years (*YELLOW SUBMARINE*, 2001, *VANISHING POINT*, *EL TOPO*, etc.). Roeg's solo effort, *WALKABOUT* (1971), had light scattered attention in the U.S., but now seems to be going through a film club revival. With *DON'T LOOK NOW* (1973) Roeg entered the big budget stage. The film was extremely well received by the reviewing establishment, with slight reservations about its trick ending. Exhibition was mixed. In Chicago, for example, it opened in an art house for a moderate run, and then went into the neighborhoods as second feature to a slick schlock thriller, *THE POSSESSION OF JOEL DELANEY*.

From these three films Roeg's trademarks are very clear: a beautiful color cinematography, extensive intercutting, a willingness to be mildly experimental (e.g., electronic music), use of actors thought of as limited—or limited acting roles for them—and a basic thematic preoccupation with the sudden collision of different cultures or lifestyles, throwing questions of self-identity into relief and ending in death for one of the main characters. Whether these characteristics are sufficient to sustain a director's career, or to form the basis for distinguished achievement within commercial cinema, remains problematic.

Roeg's basic appeal rests on his camerawork. He began as a cameraman

and achieved his first recognition for excellent work on films such as THE CARETAKER, PETULIA, THE MASQUE OF THE RED DEATH, FAR FROM THE MADDING CROWD, FAHRENHEIT 451, and the second unit work in LAWRENCE OF ARABIA. In the cinematography of his own films, he uses a generally static camera. Each shot displays a mastery of composition, framing, focus, color qualities of the film stock, movement within the frame, and lenses. As much could be said about a good still photographer, and for someone as accomplished in photography as he is, it is curious that Roeg does not exploit the motion picture camera's potential by moving the camera or using zooms more frequently. Even the few times Roeg changes from his static pattern, such as a subjective camera shot down at a character's legs walking in WALKABOUT, one is frequently not at all sure why the shot is there since many times his subjective shots have no clear narrative function.

Roeg is a master of the still life, composition in two planes, and the wide angle close up. But it is mastery, not innovation. In his visuals he falls solidly within the current mainstream of the commercial graphic arts. Virtually every shot is faintly familiar. It could be found in the POPULAR PHOTOGRAPHY ANNUAL of a decade earlier. Which is not wrong, or bad, but it helps explain the ease with which Roeg is understood by his audiences, straight and stoned. Within commercial film, his camerawork is new and fresh. But that is a measure of the relative backwardness of commercial cinematography compared with its equivalent in still photography.

JUXTAPOSITION AS ORGANIZING PRINCIPLE

In employing his footage, Roeg builds his films on polar contrasts. Sometimes this is simply a gimmick, as in the opening minutes of PERFORMANCE, where he mechanically moves the audience by showing the opening and closing of doors and drawers to link events at different places and times. But usually his contrasts have a thematic purpose. In WALKABOUT the opening sequence establishes the idea of a modern city with various shots, which are then juxtaposed in editing with shots of the outback, the Australian wilderness. The same type of contrast is quickly developed in individual shots as well. The six year old boy we will soon find is a principal character walks home in his neat blue schoolboy's blazer and cap, through a park or botanical garden with well labeled trees. Roeg revels in such antitheses: city/ country, civilization/ wilderness, label/ tree, unnatural/ natural. In WALKABOUT the contrasts go on throughout the film. Indeed they form the bulk of the story: two urban children, a 14 year old girl and her younger brother, are taken into the wilderness by their father who unsuccessfully attempts to kill them and who then suicides. The pair attempt to survive and eventually encounter a 16 year old native who is on his initiation "walkabout"—a period of lone survival in the outback which proves his worthiness for manhood. He returns them to

civilization, dying when they reach it.

In PERFORMANCE the basic juxtaposition is of two demi-worlds, that of racketeer Harry Flowers and that of a rock music recluse, as we follow a London strong-arm man, Chas (James Fox) on the lam from his boss into the drug world of a fallen rock star, Turner (Mick Jagger). The contrast in DON'T LOOK NOW is basically between prescience and coincidence, with the wife (Julie Christie) accepting the unexplainable while her husband (Donald Sutherland) rationalistically rejects his "sixth sense."

Cinematically, the contrasts in Roeg's films are continuous. In WALKABOUT, for example, the urban children are first seen together in a swimming pool next to a body of natural water. Their western urban clothing is contrasted with the native's belt of snakes. The urban pair rely on verbal language and find security in the voices on their transistor radio, while communication with the young hunter is effective only through gesture, etc. At times Roeg's fascination with visual antonyms is almost bludgeoning. The native hunts with spear and hands while Europeans are shown killing game with a rifle fired from a jeep. Cutting apart a kangaroo for dinner in the wild is opposed to an urban butcher shop. A burning auto is crosscut with a roasting animal carcass. These juxtapositions—and WALKABOUT is especially loaded with them—are a Lévi-Strauss type of structuralist's perfect data ... but they lack any especial meaning. In WALKABOUT the establishing sequence at the beginning gives us the contrast, but the contrast is then continued for the rest of the film in an all too predictable vein.

For Roeg juxtaposition is basic, but he does not follow Eisenstein's idea of montage establishing a synthesis of a higher order than the individual shots. Nor does he succeed in using contrasts in a metaphoric, oxymoronic, or even ambiguous way. Rather juxtaposition is presented, and in being simply presented, it gives a kind of implied irony. Roeg seems to repeat again and again,

"See the difference between artificiality and naturalness. You and I can see it in this image or set of images, but the characters in the film cannot, and this is our superiority."

But he also stacks the cards against the characters who provide the dramatic point of view. His 14 year old adolescent girl/woman (a contrast Roeg underlines) is old enough, sufficiently socialized, to opt for civilization without thought. Yet she is young enough that she has insufficient self-consciousness to choose her own life, or a different one from her parent's and society's expectations. She does not really learn or change or grow from her experience. And this peculiarly static young woman will, of course, be married, and routinized. As Roeg shows us at the end, she will have a glimmer of an idyllic past that might have been, but no way of relating that to her present with a husband babbling on

about his promotion up the corporate ladder. It is a strangely frozen fantasy. This girl/woman is as unchanging in her nature as the pantyhose she wears while climbing small buttes and rough terrain and which never become dirty or torn. Roeg does not explore psychological change, but psychological stasis and its inevitable end in death or sterility.

Chas' character and actions provide another example of Roeg's interest in basically static personality. While *PERFORMANCE* uses an essentially familiar storyline, that of the pursuer and pursued, the directors choose not to focus on the pursuer, as in the detective variant, nor really on the pursuit or pursued, as in chase films—any of which tend to give an automatic inexorability to the plot. Rather the film takes Chas initially in his daily activities (lovemaking) and his job (enforcer for Harry Flowers). It is soon clear that Chas is basically a follower, for in Harry Flower's homosexual gang, strict obedience is expected and demanded. So when Chas messes up, he must run for his life. He does not run very far, merely to another part of London where he expects to find a room in Turner's house. What he finds is Turner and two female companions living in seclusion in a house that is a museum of objects to experience while drugged, a freak's closet of sensory experience. Once there it is logical for Chas to stay put, but he seeks to arrange an escape from the country, which is his undoing. While all four members of Turner's household are hiding from the outside world, Chas cannot accept the refuge. Again he is the follower who gets in trouble, this time for the last time in his life.

Roeg's use of juxtaposition to present a surface complexity is most dazzling in *PERFORMANCE*, where the Mick Jagger character is given to fantasies and at one point becomes a person he has never met: Harry Flowers. At another point, during a courtroom trial, suddenly the jurors are inexplicably watching a film. Then Roeg cuts to a protection racket shakedown of a pornography filmmaker with a porn flick in the background showing whipping, which is paralleled later with the whipping of Chas. (As an aside, a friend who has studied much of the Kinsey Institute film collection informs me that a whipping sequence is obligatory in British porn films.) The entire second part of the *PERFORMANCE* approximately duplicates much of the dialogue of the first half, as well as having its own set of parallels and contrasts between protagonists.

But for all of his intriguing kaleidoscopic multiplication of images (especially if you are stoned), Roeg leaves us with a series that adds up to nothing in particular. There is much time exploring images. Cammel's "script" (apparently the film was roughed out in story and detailed day by shooting day, à la Godard), offers the camera little else to do. Jagger as rockstar recluse and James Fox as man-on-the-run change clothes, wigs, and other styles, but do not develop as characters. They are a

fitting pair, unable to change themselves, but willing to exchange identities with each other. If PERFORMANCE were the slightest bit comic, one could enjoy it as a mock profundity. But it is not comic, and after viewing, the film leaves an aftertaste of depressing strained seriousness in dealing with well-worn illusion/reality materials. Indeed, the cult reception of this film at colleges as something incredibly “new” says more about undergraduate ignorance of Pirandello, Cocteau, and a hundred others than it does about Roeg’s and Cammel’s talent.

The combination of excellent photography, straining always at the naturally beautiful or fascinating, an elementary narrative that never becomes as pure as a fable or Märchen and a merely ironic use of contrast manages to sustain 90 minutes or so, but never moves any of Roeg’s films to a higher level than the sum of its disparate parts. This is interesting—even fascinating—and Roeg’s freedom from conventional film narration is refreshing, but it is also limiting. There are only a few times in WALKABOUT when his simplistic contrasts move into a more sophisticated series of transformations. On the simplest level such transformations come from, for example, intercutting the heroine’s idyllic swimming sequence with the hero’s hunting actions. The swimming sequence goes on so long that it finally becomes more than Roeg’s fascination with undulations of a female figure underwater and is changed into a contrast of the lyric and simply pictorially beautiful contrasted with the practical and forceful action of the hunter. Another sequence which gains force instead of merely stating is the intercutting of the female torso and legs with tree trunks branching in two. Both sequences —swimming/ hunting and torso/ tree—are sufficiently extended in time to go beyond a simple narrative function to make a statement about life and nature ... though the statements are hardly very profound or ingenious.

When Roeg is able to use contrast to develop his narrative, he excels, as in the bedroom sequence in DON'T LOOK NOW. Bereaved by the sudden death of their daughter, John and Laura Baxter, in Venice where he is helping restore a church, are distanced from each other because of the sorrow they feel. A seer tells Laura she can “see” their daughter, and Laura has a new sense of happiness. That evening the couple makes love, perhaps for the first time since the tragedy. They are shown in a long intercut sequence of lovemaking, with much caressing, done very unsensationally, and dressing afterwards to go out to dinner. The dressing is done slowly, with the pair basking in the afterglow of sex. Taken together the two time periods merge, showing the maturity of their relationship, its tenderness, and depth. Here Roeg expands sex into love, no small accomplishment.

Achieving a richer meaning through visuals is unfortunately rare in Roeg’s films. The bedroom scene is equaled only in a passage in WALKABOUT, as the trio leaves the outback. With the wanderers’

return to civilization, Roeg's previous simplicity wanes slightly and his earlier contrasts—which remained on the level of flying bird/ jet plane, and burned-out car/ oddity for the natives—begin to darken and deepen. The hunter brings the children to a European farm house, but the settlement turns out to be abandoned and falling into decay. Magazine illustrations from the 40s and a box of old family photographs are the only human figures in the place. For no clear reason the frontier farm has been abandoned and is becoming a natural piece of the outback. A mood is established: slightly melancholy, slightly subdued, slightly decayed. This is the film's first real evidence of change. There is a highway nearby; the children will leave. As always the girl insists on cleaning and washing—a ritual to make them suitable for civilization.

Images of death are presented. The hunter is shown attacking a bull-like animal barehanded. The same type of animal is shown being shot by urban hunters. The same type of animal is shown dying, stuck in a drying waterhole. The dead bones are seen. Among bones the camera finds the black skinned native with his body painted in white. The hunter begins a dance ritual around the farmhouse. While it is not clear if the dance is a courtship ceremony, from the young woman's point of view, it may be. In any case, it is clear that she fears being raped and is effectively a prisoner in the house while the young man dances without stop outside. In the morning he appears to be gone, and is then found dead, hanging by his arms in a tree. The cause of or reason for his death is unstated. The urban children leave for the road and the camera shows images of debris. The abandoned portable radio suddenly blares out a message. Images of decay continue. In this Roeg achieves a poetic evocation of the young woman's decision to return to her people, of the young man's apparently self-willed death, of the sad impossibility resulting from the accidental juxtaposition of these characters at this time under these circumstances.

The sequence, effective within itself, cannot carry the burden of the whole film, though by default it must. The film runs along for most of its length on the simple continued addition of contrasts and this sudden multiplication of meanings and levels only emphasizes the poverty of what precedes and follows rather than raising the film as a whole to a more majestic complexity.

ROEG'S SIMPLE MESSAGE

It can be argued that Roeg's obviousness in all his films is not a fault, unless one would also claim Hitchcock's obviousness, say, is a flaw. And there's a truth in that. Roeg's moral universe is a simple given in his films, a given as immediate and tangible as we find in melodrama. Through his use of visuals for constant contrasts, the director raises a bare but lofty moral superstructure at the start of his films. In much the same way, through dramatic simplification and abstraction through

music, most opera gives us a simplicity one can easily accept. It would be wrong to interrogate Roeg's films for consistent logical narrative development or for realistic psychology, just as it is missing the point to question opera on the same points.

The texture, not the framework, is what is interesting. Roeg is fascinated with singular detail. Turner's house is the best example—a series of chambers filled with freaky things, from inlaid tables to dirty dishes. In *PERFORMANCE*, detail serves a narrative function, but in *DON'T LOOK NOW* it runs off on its own. Laura Baxter uses a Rapidograph pen: of course she does—Oxford chic—but the detail is merely there. We are forced to notice it; but for what end? Just to say, “Ah yes, she uses a Rapidograph” ? But that is to give the viewer information about style, not character. Similarly, Roeg's camera pursues textures with a vengeance: bedroom walls with Rococo decoration, mosaics, embroidered blouses, the seer's unusual jeweled pin. This attention to style is forced on the audience until one almost comes to expect to read the labels on the character's clothing, so we'll know it came from the right shop.

But this trait also shows a curious lack of narrative control, which is more problematic when Roeg uses color. He cleverly inverts our expectations of Venice, presenting neither J.M.W. Turner's phosphorescent white city, nor Visconti's sculpted array of colors. Instead Venice is winter grey, and wet, and at night a colorless dark. A single accent color is chosen, red, which generally has a narrative use. The daughter was wearing a red raincoat when she drowned; John Baxter foresaw her death when a drop of water on a slide he was watching flowed red from landing on the daughter's coat pictured in the slide, becoming a full screen symbol of bleeding. In a church we see reddish candle flames and a red votive light. Laura wears bright red boots at one point. When John is installing a huge grotesque head on the exterior of the church he is restoring we see red marks on it.

But from time to time we also find apparently gratuitous red presented. For no reason John at one point toys with a piece of Venetian glass with a red bottom. The audience is primed to think it must mean something, but what it means is not at all clear. Perhaps it is just part of the visual texture. And Roeg's films bear repeated viewing for that very curious texture, in the same way that *THE HELLSTROM CHRONICLE* does, provided you can dismiss the “story.” But this argument runs down at a crucial point, which is this: You can appreciate Roeg on that level only so long as you hold in abeyance his irony, which itself makes a statement on the action. Roeg does not merely stand apart from his characters, but constantly above them, and has us share that position.

In *PERFORMANCE*, for all the tricks of cutting, costumes, masks, roles, and fantasy sequences, we remain voyeurs, ironic voyeurs. We find Roeg

building the film on contrasts which presumably comment on each other. A lawyer defending his client as being involved in a legitimate merger, not a forced takeover, is intercut with a racketeer making the same distinction. Business equals crime ... a startling equation only to the upper middle class intelligentsia who think of Brecht's THREE PENNY OPERA as another musical. The other contrasts and parallels function on about the same level. Disguising oneself from pursuers is paralleled with wearing a costume for fun; red paint is paralleled with blood, and so forth.

The most effective parallels and contrasts in PERFORMANCE involve identities, social roles, sexual roles, disguises, costumes, and performances. In the last analysis it adds up to permutations without profundity. Roeg puts the film characters and the film audience through a lot of changes, but to no apparent end. Granted, that carefully going through the film one can find traces of references to Jorge Luis Borges, Bergman's PERSONA, painters Francis Bacon, Richard Hamilton, and Peter Blake. But in the flow of the film they are not picked up, or if they are (merged faces from PERSONA, a pretty obvious one), they don't add anything, not even self-congratulation at having caught it. If the outside references mean anything, particularly to a stoned audience, it is merely as part of the cultural ambiance of our times, and it would be pretentious to make anything out of it as far as criticism of the film goes. But, one feels Roeg really is trying to make something more out of his films than simple mental massages or mind candy for freaks. In a recent *Sight and Sound* interview (Winter 1973-74) he confesses his

“fascination with the discovery of identity. I can't but be amazed at the reinvention of people—people seem to be reinventing themselves all the time ... You can take it on a social level: you can take it on all sorts of levels ... I think it's a destructive thing, because it gets one further away from solving the puzzle ... By changing identity you're getting further away from where you fit in, because you are putting yourself in another hole.”

It is probably significant that Roeg here uses the word “identity”—indicating a somewhat superficial part of the self—rather than terms which imply the whole being such as “character,” “self,” or “existence” or which infer a deeper level such as “essence” or “soul.” In any case, how are we to reconcile this earnest claim with the visual evidence of Roeg's imagination spewing contrasts in near-desperate abandon? The semblance of order and rationality in his films is constantly being broken by irrationality and disorder.

Chas as protection racket enforcer lives with crisp manners, meticulous clothes, nearly clinical sex. Yet in a few more film minutes he is lolling in a drug induced looseness, wearing a bizarre unruly wig, and falling in

with the polymorphous eroticism of Turner's house. On their own terms the world of Harry Flowers' gang or of Turner's house is logical and coherent, but the intersection of the two when Chas hides out at Turner's leads to disorder and death, just as the meeting point of city and outback does, and the joining of prescience and rationality does.

Another way of looking at what Roeg is doing is by considering what he is choosing not to do. The WALKABOUT story line is the familiar one of people from civilization surviving in nature. Its lineage is older than its first great example, ROBINSON CRUSOE, and in recent times it has been especially popular in science fiction. Defoe, the first important bourgeois English novelist, wrote his version as a celebration of the individual. Robinson is the classic middle class man who even in solitude can establish an economy of production and consumption. We appreciate his self-confidence, ingenuity, and optimism. In Defoe's version the story affirms individual wit and self-reliance, traits which are generally stressed in the story line's tradition. The civilized person in nature theme almost always focuses on establishing a functioning economy. (Thoreau begins WALDEN with a long chapter on economy, in various senses of the word.) Most of our interest is in the techniques, attempts, setbacks and inevitable triumphs of the protagonist in doing so. The story's other emphasis is on sustaining social relations.

Robinson meets his man Friday, the Swiss Family Robinson maintains the traditional European family in the wilds, etc., etc. Even in dark inversions and ironic distortions, such as LORD OF THE FLIES, the question of social relations is central, as it is in other variants on the theme such as the lost platoon or drifting lifeboat versions.

Roeg changes both of these traditional interests quite drastically. Rather than the characteristic documentary concern with the means of survival—what we could call the WHOLE EARTH CATALOG approach to the theme—he gives us a six and a fourteen year old who are pitifully unable to survive alone. Roeg could have dismissed the economic basis by putting his protagonists in an Edenic setting, but he chooses a harsh environment and then ignores the nature of a hunting and foraging economy. He shows it, to be sure, but he carefully avoids, any depth consideration of it. For Roeg, survival is no achievement, and civilization socializes out any native capacity for survival. Curiously, Roeg also chooses not to explore the social dimension of this theme. Again, he shows it, but he does not really examine it. Rather he gives us very essentialist characters: a static girl/woman, her brother who is a mere chorus to her, and the young native hunter who remains interesting but impenetrable since we cannot understand his language, his culture, or his motivations. It is a given that this young woman and this young man meet, but they can never really interact. Roeg shows a dilemma and refuses to comment on it. It is near-tragedy in a moral vacuum.

The same could be said of PERFORMANCE. In their own ways the

worlds of Harry Flowers and of Turner are decadent (in a descriptive, not a pejorative sense), within the film. And the effect of Turner on Chas clearly cannot last, cannot result in a “better” Chas, cannot emerge on a higher plane for either of them. With inevitable progression we watch an inherently unstable situation come into being, shimmer for a while, and then end.

Are these two films just exercises in melancholy voyeurism? Apparently so, unless one is to take Roeg’s clodhopper homilies seriously such as the quote from A. E. Housman near the end of WALKABOUT, which transforms the Victorian’s genteel stoicism into an Edgar Guest platitude. Apparently so, unless one is to find the references to Borges in PERFORMANCE carrying the film to a more philosophical level than business equals crime.

DON'T LOOK NOW plays with the reality/ appearance mind game evoked naturally by the long *aminita muscaria* trip section in PERFORMANCE, but without resolving the question. In PERFORMANCE it is acceptable because it is excused by the consciousness change of being drugged. In DON'T LOOK NOW it is coyly jejune because the protagonist keeps asking rational questions, and when they are not answered, we feel cheated by the *demon ex machina* at the end. While the film depicts the recurring polarity sacrifice/ salvation, in terms of the central character there is no “development” but only a wavering, an oscillating between different impulses, which perfectly fits his social role as intellectual, but which allows a complete evasion of the questions raised, like the joke that makes the listener the teller’s fool. Thus the parallels (a table tipping over/John on a scaffold that tips over; the grotesque stone head he installs/the deformed dwarf who murders him), and the repetitions (the color red; a recurrent funeral barge), and the echoes (the couple being told the church they are in front of is that of St. Nicholas, patron saint of children and scholars) serve to structure the film in a way that we constantly expect to make connections, to link one image with another, one detail with others, and so forth. This expectation is sometimes gratified, as in the lovemaking episode when two rituals are combined into a truth, but more often it is disappointed.

But, to take Roeg’s side, he is not really interested in answering the reality/ appearance puzzle, but rather in using it as a device to talk about behavior. For Roeg the question is irrelevant or unsolvable, so the real question become how should you act? Clearly John Baxter is wrong in following his pattern of skeptical rationality—it kills him. Truth is not to be pursued, but to be glimpsed fleetingly, and even then you are not sure of having seen it. But Laura Baxter, by simply accepting, ends up with only a double bereavement. Posed in this way it is as absurd a reductionism as the evangelist’s “Granted we can't know, but if there is even the slightest chance that there is a God and heaven, shouldn't one

..." Yet Roeg's "message" is especially simplistic: better to accept animism and have security in that than lose your life in a remarkably silly pursuit.

CONFUSION AS RESOLUTION

Roeg's films lend themselves to Freudian interpretation easily, almost too easily (which itself says something about them). He is fascinated with the basic oral fantasy of engulfment, of losing the boundaries of one's self. This is often phrased in terms of varieties of animism: the supernatural, the uncanny, déjà vu, magic, the occult, transformation, verbal formulas, telepathy, and a sense of helplessness in the face of another. In addition, his work is full of transformed primal scene fantasies (darkness, vagueness, the unknown, changing shapes, nakedness, appearing/ disappearing, fighting and struggle, blood, phallic weapons) and their defense fantasies (quietness, motionlessness, sleep, death).

In children, belief in animism shows an unawareness of their own subjectivity. In adults it is an attempt to repress their subjectivity. Since Freud, Anglo-American culture has rested uneasily with the knowledge that subjectivity, including the subconscious, exists. The uneasiness stems largely from our Puritan heritage, which asserts that the individual is responsible for his/her conscious self, and now also responsible for his/her emotional and unconscious self as well. That's heavy ... and coming to terms with it is perhaps one of the last steps to maturity in our time. Acceptance of one's emotional self is what most (middle class) therapy is aimed at, after all. The error, obviously, comes from putting all that responsibility on the individual without recognizing the social shaping of every individual's personal psychology. Animism, especially in its current fads, is comforting because it displaces one's subjectivity and in turn one's responsibility for it. Wouldn't we all like to be able to say every once in a while, along with the implicit message of *THE EXORCIST*, "the Devil made me do it" ? Though shoddy theology, it is satisfying on the level of the everyday.

Laura Baxter's belief in animism turns out to be safe, while her husband's denial of it propels him into death, which is obviously unsafe. Similarly, Chas is safe in so long as he remains in Turner's womb/tomb house, but his attempted rational outwitting of Harry Flowers trips him up and leads to his undoing. In contrast, Turner does not will his own death so much as enact a yoga of death. It is the last experience, tasting the final unknown, and something he'd been flirting with via the mushroom. But in the end we remain outside of Turner's decisions. It is change itself that is questioned, and in a rather saddening way. If you experience a new consciousness when you are part of the urban/ outback or gangster/ hippie or natural/ supernatural confrontation, things become unsettled for you. There is danger in it and it turns out

badly, ending in death.

Roeg's plot situations are patently ridiculous if poked at rationally, which is to say that they are not what they appear to be. The films are really about the finding and loss of innocence. The world is post-Edenic, even the outback is, but perhaps one can find a hint of innocence through drugs, in finding the rare idyllic parts of the outback, through investigating the Venetian labyrinth. But whatever is found cannot hold. Turner's place cannot be defended against the Flowers crew, one must return to the city, the pursuer ends up pursued. And therein lies the melancholy.

Roeg raises our anxieties only to assure us that the murderer is, after all, not like us and the victim is not like us either. This separation of the audience and subject at hand allows him to present a Gothic cinema but without our, or his, implication in it. Roeg composes films around imaginary potentials: that the hunted can hide, that innocence can be found, that rationality is sufficient. He then proceeds to show that possibility as untenable. But since we feel no part of the process, since we simply observe it, we can finally dismiss it. We are voyeurs at a process that ends by affirming that the only thing we can be sure of in life is a melancholy confusion.

With Ken Russell, Roeg shares a deep and obvious Romantic concern with the elemental in life: emotion, passion, the subjective. Both are constantly making it a major part of their films. But the difference between the two is more interesting than this obvious similarity. Roeg presents the *contrast* of rational and emotional; naturalness and instinct are thwarted and distorted. In this he is like Gênet: defining one thing by its complementary—master and slave form a symbiotic relation. If Roeg takes Gênet's approach, we could say that Russell takes William Burroughs': total immersion in one thing which by implication shows the opposite. With Russell's films one always senses that the path of excess finally leads to the palace of wisdom, though the wisdom is not explicit. The orgiastic frenzy of *THE DEVILS* subsides to let us know that barbarism cannot hold, it is intolerable, whatever the alternative. *SAVAGE MESSIAH* ends logically with Gaudier-Brzeska's *oeuvre*, for his sculpture is the achievement of order, beauty, and certainty out of the chaos of his life. A mind like Russell's can relax only in the theatre, where everything is possible, and even urged. *THE BOY FRIEND* allows a precision and perfection never attainable in life's messiness and unrounded corners.

Roeg does not find artifice a solution, an imposing of order on disparate reality an accomplishment. Actually he transports his characters to exotic environments: Turner's house, the outback, Venice. Artifice in Roeg's films is thrown up for a hall of mirrors effect. Turner's persona/makeup/ mask is shared by Chas in his shopping for a costume. One

exchanges identities but never attains a final one save in death. And death is an end to the clashing imbalance of life. But even when chosen or willed, it provides only a single certainty—that time stops, that the melancholy confusion ends, for the individual who dies.

Roeg and Russell solve their Romanticism in different ways. Russell's ends in aestheticism: art lasts, it is more important than an individual's life. Implicitly this affirms social life—art is a form of communication. Roeg's characters lean to the decadent resolution of Romanticism, and throughout confuse life and art, reality and appearance, and in the end affirm neither.

The appeal of Roeg's films to date rests on different qualities for different audiences. For the user of mild psychedelic drugs, *PERFORMANCE*, and to a lesser extent the other two films, provides a great multiplicity of visual and aural inputs. However the users often confuse the undeniable plethora of impressions, and its pleasantness, with indicating a meaningfulness and aesthetic complexity which is not there on sober examination. Somewhat overlapping this audience is the appeal of the first two films to late adolescents, who seek in film art an experience, a knowledge, a statement in a somewhat different form. This too, Roeg certainly provides, but exploring "identity" rather than "being" has its limits for viewers who have moved on from the former to the latter in their own experience. For people especially interested in film as an art, Roeg is very interesting in his willingness to exploit film as film and for his ability to work in the commercial feature system successfully while pushing the uniquely filmic over standard melodramatic film narrative. With *DON'T LOOK NOW* Roeg demonstrated his appeal for film goers who prefer classy entertainment, though he did so by focusing on characters and a life style that seems right out of the ad pages of the *New Yorker*.

In his first three films Nicholas Roeg has established his importance and indicated his potential. What he does with that potential seems a very open question. In his use of the unique possibilities of film within the commercial system, he seems one of the most promising younger directors. Potentially, he has even more promise of developing along these lines than Robert Altman. But the biggest obstacle to his development at this point seems to be his limited themes and ideas. Roeg faces a choice between being a slick entertainer and doing more of the same, or advancing his creativity and imagination. He could be a very good entertainer, especially if he discards his pretensions to saying something about Life and develops the excellent comic gift he showed in the hotelkeeper's role in *DON'T LOOK NOW*. If Roeg wants to make films which are indeed serious, on the other hand, he will have to move beyond his current simplistic message and find a content to match his technical complexity and sophistication.

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